

# Juvenile justice funding takes hit in Benton, Franklin counties

By Drew Foster, Herald staff writer



Juvenile probation counselors Sean Guajardo, left, and Kris Overvold talk to a juvenile offender Tuesday at the Juvenile Justice Center in Kennewick. Budget cuts could mean the bicounty center may have to accept fewer offenders because of cuts in detention officers, probation employees and other programs. See story below.

**PROSSER** -- Budget cuts on both sides of the Columbia River may lead to the end of juvenile drug court in Benton and Franklin counties.

Franklin County is considering cutting \$160,515, or about 9 percent, from its funding for the Benton-Franklin Juvenile Justice Center. And Sharon Paradis, juvenile justice center administrator, expects Benton County to follow suit.

"Historically, if one county takes a reduction, the other county takes a reduction," she said.

Staff cuts also are planned at the juvenile justice center. Paradis is looking at reducing the number of juvenile detention officers from 22 to 19, which would reduce the number of youths who can be held at the center from 60 to 35. The center averages about 46 youths each day, although if fully staffed it could handle 88.

Paradis and several other county officials presented their budget outlook to Benton County commissioners Tuesday. Unlike some of her fellow Benton County officials, her budget also depends on Franklin County.

"If Benton County takes a similar reduction (to Franklin County), we would face a \$535,000 reduction to our budget," she said.

Consequently, the juvenile justice center also is looking at cutting its 18-person probation staff by 21/2 full-time equivalent positions, which Paradis said will mean less accountability for juvenile offenders.

Reductions also would be made in support staff, security and urinalysis testing, which Paradis said would put more juveniles on an honor system.

"The reality is kids that have drug and alcohol issues have a pretty hard time adhering to an honor system," she said.

Pre-employment polygraph screening also would end.

The juvenile justice center is requesting about \$5.7 million from the two counties in 2010, but likely will get about \$5.1 million.

About \$1.5 million would come from Franklin County and \$3.6 million from Benton County. The juvenile justice center received about \$5.8 million for 2009.

Benton County Prosecutor Andy Miller said the juvenile court docket in Benton County remains steady compared with 2008, which was slightly higher than 2007.

The state discontinued much of its drug court funding June 30. The Juvenile Justice Center's drug court budget was supplemented by Benton and Franklin counties so the program could continue through 2009, but the mid-year budget cuts ended about half of the juvenile drug court's programs.

Facing a \$542,000 budget cut, the juvenile justice center likely will have to close its drug court, at least temporarily.

"It will just be gone," Paradis said.

She said \$114,000 is the minimum needed to operate a successful drug court, which could serve 12 participants. That's about half the previous funding.

Benton County Commissioner Max Benitz Jr. said the board may make budget decisions Thursday. The county is looking to trim about \$1.6 million from its 2010 baseline budget.

"There has been no determination made yet," Benitz said.

"The juvenile drug court is grant-funded," he added, "and the board made the decision that if the grant goes away, then the funding goes away."

Commissioner Leo Bowman said grant-funded programs usually are scrapped when grants dry up unless a program is deemed important enough to eliminate another existing program instead.

Bowman said drug court is high on his priority list, but not at the top. He said it's unlikely the juvenile department will receive additional money. "The die is cast," he said.

Adult drug court also faces an uncertain future. Pat Austin, Superior Court administrator, asked the commissioners to continue funding it through 2010 so current participants can graduate.

"We've made a commitment to the people, and they've made a commitment to the community," she said.

Austin is requesting about \$114,000 from Benton County and \$50,000 from Franklin County for 2010 drug court operations. Circle of Hope, a nonprofit organization, would provide about \$35,000, she said.

"About 75 percent of our caseload is in Benton County," she said. A two-year, \$200,000 state grant for adult program expired June 30.

That program has 45 participants and, if 2010 funding is approved, it would not accept any more next year.

Looking at 2011, Austin said, "We're going to continue to search for funding. I'm not real hopeful the state is going to have any. She hopes to find community funding.

If either the juvenile or adult drug courts are lost, Austin said it would be felt throughout the Tri-Cities.

She said drug courts can lower recidivism rates, reduce the amount of babies born with drug-related problems, trim incarceration costs and reduce burdens on family members of drug addicts and alcoholics.

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